Wisconsin Bear Advisory Committee Meeting

Wednesday, September 26th, 2018
9:00 – 3:00

Meeting convened at 9:00

Public input (3 minutes per public attendee)

-Public comments:

- Want to see the Department relying on science.
- Expressed concern about the bear bait use study as it did not account for corn eaten after milk stage.
- Concerned that the number of producers in the county is so low that if the reports were discussed among other members of the public, the landowners could be identified.
- Once damage appraisals hit $10,000 they are maxed out; this cap needs to be removed.
- Referenced perceived problem with abatement program in Ashland County. Last year, 29 bears removed from one particular farm in the county and 9 shot. Recommended allowing more flexible baiting options in local area to keep bears away from corn and allow them to be available for hunter harvest.

Presentation: *Black Bear Damage & Nuisance Management in Wisconsin (Brad Koele)*

- Statute- 29.885- statute that allows for the removal of a nuisance bear
  29.889- abatement program etc
- Have policy and code to help make decisions
- Agriculture vs nuisance- are the 2 complaint types
- Cooperative agreement with WS- - Trying to get the cost of the agreement with Wildlife Services
- Response level critical- DNR responds because of the human health and safety risk but all other response levels WS responds with DNR help- provide technical assistance 60% of the time

<u>Examples of nuisance bear response-</u>

- Most issues can be solved with technical assistance
- In 2010, there were 12 bears euthanized. That year was an outlier, it was the year they did Grantsburg study, where sows were teaching cubs from multiple generations learned behavior and lethal control was used. The next year lethal control in the area dropped to none

Landowner cost share program

- Implemented in 2009 because landowners weren't working to reduce the conflict to get chances to kill bear
- 1st call for abatement is free 2nd call is $175 to come out and inspect damage

Agricultural Damage

- Damage & Nuisance Management: Discussion and identified of key objectives, strategies, and products for 2019 – 2029.
- Main damage types caused by bear-damage to corn, apiaries, livestock depredations

Enrollment criteria

- Must notify Wildlife Services within 14 days of damage occurring
- There are not a lot of bear enrollments compared to the number of producers in the state, 50-60 enrollees a year due to bear damage, mainly in the north.
- Bear damage abatement strategies used -open the land to public hunting, putting up fencing, trapping and relocating problem bear, issuing shooting permits
- Member of the committee pointed out that people who enroll in the bear program must spend a certain amount each year (time, money, work hours) on bear abatement
- Committee member asked if the department can do a better job of keeping the website updated to provide more real-time information to enrollees.
- Hounds can be used on the land with property owner permission
- Cons to enrolling in the program
  - Damage can be done before noticed in field.
  - Hunters may not be interested in shooting first bear.
- If it gets to the point where the animal causing the damage needs to be moved:
  - Translocation: animal is moved 20+ miles by Wildlife Services
    - This is most effective when done early in the damage
    - Negatives
      - Relocation can cost $60,000-$70,000 per year
      - Limited # of trap monitors; WS is trying to secure more
      - One negative for the producer is that some crop needs to be flattened to get trap in place.
      - Trap tampering occurs and can reduce trap effectiveness.

Shooting permits

- Local biologist can add restrictions as they deem appropriate (no bait, no harvest of cubs, etc.)
- Pros
  - Cost-effective
  - Can involve hunters
- Cons
  - Concerns about tag abuse (selling, etc.)
  - Need a pool of hunters willing to participate
  - Frustrating to hunters who wait many years for tag to hunt in area
  - Hunters not taking the first bear; may remove larger bears.

Temporary sub zones

- Two-year sub-zones- can be created to reduce damage in an area. This option hasn't been implemented in the state yet.

Committee Member Comments:

- -Some farmers feel that the damage and abatement program is labor intensive and takes away from farm work
- Limits on the amount of payments received need to be lifted- this was expressed that at board meeting
- Concern about the inability to bait on the property limiting hunter interest in the program.
- One committee member felt that Zone A needs to have higher quota and more tags
- Suggestion to eliminate the payment cap of $10,000. It was mentioned that this may lead to it being more attractive for larger farms to enroll, which might greatly increase the cost of the program.
- These issues were previously brought to the Natural Resources Board t
- Issue: many of the above are set in state statute.
- Recent issues near Ashland County farm due to expansion of corn acreage. Committee member recognizes farmer's issues, but suggested the expansion also impacts hunters.

General discussion on bear damage and the abatement program.

- We could better understand program costs by identifying how costs are spread out among enrollees (e.g., are a small number of producers responsible for the majority of the costs?). If so, this might lead to new and/or targeted practices.
- Investigation of bear damage as it relates to land cover may allow better understanding of what creates "hot spots" of damage.
- Source-sink bear behavior may confound long-term benefits of shooting permits.
- Current zone recommendations may help address problems in Rusk/Sawyer county area.
- Could adjust when hunters are allowed to hunt on ag damage permits
- Question about how Minnesota can manage bears without translocation.
- Problem with linking bear hunters to ag permits is they may not be able to respond in a timely fashion and don't want to harvest the first bear seen.
- Fencing mentioned as an option for chronic fields, but expensive and labor intensive. could look at setting up quota for chronic farms that could be fenced- this would be

Committee was reminded that the planning process does not require consensus behind a single course of action; multiple options or further research are satisfactory plan objectives.

- Issues/ideas regarding bear damage brought up by committee members:
    - Need to look at distribution of program cost/effort among enrollees.

- Don't issue tags to hunters- they should go to landowner instead. List of interested hunters should be provided to landowner; hunters would have some limited time (e.g., 2 days) to hunt when contacted.
- Challenges would be getting hunters to respond in a timely fashion, and getting them to harvest first bear seen, would remain even if a list of hunters was provided.

- One committee member supported the use of subzones.
- Agreement with GLIFWC states we won't have season before September 1st.
- One committee member talked about reducing administrative price of the program by 60 to 40% so that there is more money available to pay claims.
    - Response: there have been audits to figure out why admin cost is so high, but no inconsistencies were found
- Recommendation: The DNR should administer the program in all counties.
- Could costs be reduced by minimizing costs of appraisal, or could there be designated employees of the department who do appraisals?
    - Response: Issues can vary by county so someone familiar with the county is best to conduct appraisals.
- Suggestion: expand the program to include compensation for property damage
- Subzone option would reduce bear densities and hunter opportunity; also, may become a demographic sink. Idea would be to reduce the bear population in a subzone based on level of damage within the zone.
- Option of managing harvest statewide based on game management units rather than large current zones. Issues would arise due to small sample sizes leading to imprecise harvest estimates.
- Discussion of allowing bait to be used by hunters on shooting permits.
- Translocation best option to address damage without reducing bear numbers via lethal means. Options to improve translocation program include compensating farmers for crops damaged by setting/checking traps.
- Let's look at the data to see what options are most-effective, and effective in terms of reducing damage.
- Reminder that the public favors nonlethal control of problem bears.
- We need better understanding of the effectiveness of the various tools used to address crop damage.
- We need to somehow find resolution to the paradox that farmers want fewer bears and hunters want more bears.
- Comment that shooting can be effective; on one farm less damage was noted this year after 3 years of high harvest via shooting permits.
- Beneficial option might be treating chronic farms differently; e.g., issue them shooting permits proactively (earlier in year, prior to damage being verified).

Presentation: *Black Bear Population Monitoring and Management Goals in Wisconsin (Nathan Roberts)*

- Review of current bear population monitoring protocols.
    - Bait station survey

- Overview of the current "accounting type" model
    - Model is very sensitive to the starting value
    - Doesn't allow for density-dependence
    - Doesn't allow estimates of precision (confidence intervals) to be calculated.

- Overview of new "Age at Harvest" model option
    - Allows estimates to be updated with new data every year
    - Allows precision to be estimated (confidence intervals) every year.

<u>Considerations for Age-at-Harvest approach</u>

- still need calibration via periodic population estimates (e.g., noninvasive genetic population size estimates)
- Models provide more robust trend estimates; population size estimates less reliable.
- Models require a lot of data:
    - Reproductive rates; don't have a lot of data currently, may need to address this.
    - Assumes there is a relatively consistent age and sex structure.

<u>Preliminary Age-at-Harvest model runs compared to old model:</u>

- Zone B declining slightly compared to old model
- Zone D results comparable from the 2 models.
- Age-at-Harvest model shows greater decline in Zone A.

    - Age-at-Harvest models would "hold up better in court"
    - More confidence by OAS staff in new model output, compared to old
    - Comment: need ages from 75 M and F bears in each zone for good model performance.
    - Many other states are using similar models.
    - Initial Oneida County pilot project suggests that the genetic approach to population estimation will work; may be opportunities to reduce cost by cluster-sampling with hair snares. Clustered vs. grid-based sampling approaches will be further evaluated.
    - Genetic technique will also allow sex ratios to be estimated, and to evaluate sex-biased harvest by zone.

<u>Important questions to answer:</u>

- Is it realistic to have a goal of a specific number of bears?
- Would monitoring bear population trends and adjusting quotas in response to measures of hunter satisfaction and/or damage/nuisance issues be better?
- Need to think about where we want bears, where we don't, and why. Want to find the right tool that matches our management goals.

Committee discussion about population monitoring program:

- Do we need to select a specific model in the plan? Consensus is no, our goal should be to emphasize science-based approach that identifies information needs and provides the ability to adapt as new tools are needed/available.

Committee discussed development of an index to natural food abundance.

- Such an index has been developed in MI and MN
- Index provides ability to explain variation in harvest and hunter success. The index in MN, combined with hunter numbers, explains 90% of variation in harvest.
- Michigan's MI-MAST tool allows citizens to help collect data. Developing similar tool would provide outreach potential and allow for large samples to be collected
  Could define in the plan as a metric
- Would also provide benefit for other wildlife management programs, and forestry.
- Committee supports recommending development of a mast index in the plan.

Committee discussion on black bear population goals:

- Range would be better than a specific population goal, but public might better understand a specific population goal.
- Committee recommendation is to develop specific numeric population goals for each bear management zone that maintains high hunter satisfaction, minimum crowding, and tolerable levels of agricultural damage and nuisance issues. Would need to identify what these goals and thresholds are.

Meeting adjourned at 3:03.